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ABSTRACT

This digest considers the school counselor's role in helping students to acquire the basic skills they will need throughout their lives. A contemporary definition of basic skills includes not only the modern versions of the "three Rs" (reading, writing, and computing), but also encompasses a variety of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors (learning to learn; verbal/nonverbal communication; adaptability; personal management; group effectiveness; influence; and the abilities to understand technology, apply scientific knowledge to work situations, and balance family and work). The most promising models for helping school counselors take an active role in integrating these new basic skills across the curricula are comprehensive counseling and guidance programs. Four interactive components of comprehensive counseling and guidance programs are: (1) the guidance curriculum; (2) individual planning; (3) responsive services; and (4) system support. The need to integrate academic and vocational instruction is discussed and challenges to school counselors are presented. The digest concludes that, through comprehensive counseling and guidance programs, school counselors can help ensure that all students receive instruction in the basic skills through an integrated program of vocational and academic coursework; and that this coursework combined with a commitment to planning can be the key to students' lifelong success. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

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School Counselor Role in Planning and Integrating Basic Skills

Rich Feller, Joe Daly, and Tracy Smeltzer

The Importance of Basic Skills

A condemning finger is being pointed at the country's public school system. Industry leaders claim that postsecondary students are not graduating with the "basic skills" needed for success at work, at home, and in further education (Carnevale et al., 1988).

What are these basic skills? The contemporary list goes far beyond the traditional Three R's to include the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors needed to function in an increasingly self directed, interpersonal, and technological workplace. In addition to reading, writing, and computing, these skills include: learning to learn; effective verbal and nonverbal communication; adaptability (including creative thinking and problem solving); personal management (including self esteem, goal setting/motivation, and personal/career development); group effectiveness (including personal skills, negotiation, and teamwork); influence (including organizational effectiveness and leadership); the ability to understand technology; the ability to apply scientific knowledge to work situations; and the ability to balance and manage family and work (Feller et al., 1992).

How Counselors Can Help

Schools are being challenged to integrate these new basic skills across their curricula. This presents school counselors with an opportunity: if they can prove their effectiveness in helping students plan for and acquire the basic skills and prepare for life after high school, they can trade their traditionally services oriented, possibly expendable positions in schools for positions of influence in matters such as school reform and restructuring. Currently, the most promising models for helping school counselors take this active role are *comprehensive counseling and guidance programs*.

Comprehensive counseling and guidance programs are the "umbrella programs" of the 1990s (Gysbers, 1990), designed to provide all students with life competencies through personal, social, and career counseling. Abandoning the traditionally passive, service approach to counseling, comprehensive counseling and guidance programs employ four interactive components that take the vagueness out of the school counselor's role (Gysbers & Henderson, 1988):

1. ***The Guidance Curriculum*** — counselors provide structured, competency based activities in the classroom or in group situations, using this focused time with students to focus on content areas such as self knowledge, educational and occupational exploration, and career planning (NOICC, 1989).

2. ***Individual Planning*** — Counselors help students think ahead and think for themselves, teaching them how to plan rigorous and coherent sequences of courses, as well as monitor and manage their lives.

3. ***Responsive Services*** — Counselors meet the immediate needs of students confronting personal or educational challenges.

4. ***System Support*** — Counselors work to sustain and enhance the implementation of comprehensive counseling and guidance programs.

Integrating Basic Skills Instruction

An essential part of the effort to equip students with the basic skills is the integration of academic and vocational instruction. Basic competencies in these areas are prerequisites for lifetime learning. Additionally, as technology continues to become more sophisticated, the competencies with which students graduate are rapidly becoming requirements for landing and keeping good jobs with growth potential. Conversely, college-bound students can benefit from vocational methods of instruction and experiences connecting school to work. By using academic theory in real life settings, they can acquire skills needed outside the classroom.

Schools emphasizing acquisition of the basic skills recognize the critical role counselors can play in helping students plan a demanding sequence of academic and vocational courses that will prepare them both for employment and postsecondary education. School counselors promote the idea that vocational education is better supported when vocational and academic education are seen as complementary strategies for student success, not as competing programs of study. An example: a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, school district has discontinued its general education track. Students must now make specific curriculum choices early on. It is therefore necessary for guidance professionals to contact all students earlier and stay in contact with them. To receive a diploma, each student must plan and complete a focused curriculum leading to an aca-demic or an applied technology and career development certificate, or both. To inform the community about the methods the district is using to infuse career education into curriculum, the district sends letters to parents of all eighth graders, and requires all tenth graders to view a video explaining graduation and certificate requirements within a group guidance class. Counselors now find it much easier to promote the merits of Pittsburgh's 40 vocational options and their relation to graduation, the workplace, and postsecondary

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education. This action, along with other initiatives, has significantly reduced dropout rates (personal communication, Fred Monaco, Division of Applied Technology and Career Development, 1991).

The Counselor's Dilemma

Without a comprehensive counseling and guidance program to address the needs of all students, developmental needs are overlooked and students unable to state their needs fall through the cracks. Due to the large student to counselor ratios, many students end up selecting courses based on availability, instructor popularity, or other criteria that may have nothing to do with career plans, learning styles or basic skill needs. Traditionally, counselors have been rewarded for attending to students who already know their career needs and their principal's priorities. Little attention has been given to what has been called the "forgotten half" (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988).

Part of this stems from the nebulous role of school counselors. Counselors are expected to perform roles as varied as the schools within which they work. Some are advocates for students confronting severe family and social change, while others are saddled with large amounts of "administrivia." Many confront substance abuse, suicide, and teen pregnancy as regular parts of their day.

Comprehensive counseling and guidance programs call for counselors' reduced involvement in administrative and clerical work. They place counselors in fewer one-on-one counseling situations. At the same time, they strengthen counselors' accountability for effectively helping all students prepare for the world beyond high school (Gysbers, 1990). Unfortunately, implementing comprehensive counseling and guidance programs has been a low priority in the school reform movement. This could be due to (a) hesitancy of school counselors to vocalize their positions, (b) school counselors' traditional isolation from schools' mainstream instructional programs, or (c) school counselors' limited involvement in reform (Levi & Ziegler, 1991).

Implementing comprehensive counseling and guidance programs on a large scale requires the revamping and greater standardization of school counselors' education. Preservice school counselors need a more specific, focused program that arms them with the essentials of professional renewal. School counselor education should be built on a foundation of educational developmental theory and practice as well as psychological theory. Preservice school counselors need training in several areas: 1) helping students plan their coursework and futures; 2) promoting curricula and instructional methods which integrate academic and vocational education; and 3) implementing comprehensive counseling and guidance programs.

Summary

The workplace, families, and a democracy require resilient workers able to think, use technology correctly, get along with others, adapt to change, and embrace lifelong learning. Through comprehensive counseling and guidance programs, school counselors can help ensure that all students, regardless of their immediate plans after high school, receive instruction in the basic skills through an integrated program of vocational and academic coursework. This coursework and a commitment to planning can be the key to students' lifelong success at work, at home, and in further education.

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